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U.S. Fears Soviet Leap in A-Arms

Anticipated Big Edge Led to Push for 'Star Wars'

By GEORGE SKELTON,
Times Staff Writer

The Reagan Administration's main motivation for developing a "Star Wars" missile defense system is the anticipation that during the next decade, the Soviet Union will become far superior to the United States in offensive nuclear weaponry, it has been learned.

In the pessimistic view of President Reagan's principal advisers, Soviet nuclear arms superiority—if unchecked by a meaningful arms agreement—will come about largely because of the Kremlin's expected deployment of new land-based intercontinental missiles that are highly mobile and virtually impossible to track with U.S. spy satellites.

This argument for "Star Wars"—officially known as the Strategic Defense Initiative—is one that has prevailed for nearly two years within the Administration, but for various reasons it has been played down in public statements, if mentioned at all.

However, it was learned, the Administration is now gearing up to take this case to the American public in an effort to sell the citizenry—and thus Congress—on a very expensive research program expected to cost at least \$26 billion.

Inevitable Situation

The Soviet nuclear superiority also will develop, officials believe, because of what they privately regard as an inevitable situation where the Kremlin leadership can deploy land-based intercontinental missiles virtually at will, while the United States increasingly is constrained by political opposition and the fact that it has much less territory than the Soviet Union in which to scatter its weapons.

Americans generally oppose having nuclear missiles based near them, realizing that they would be the first targets of any Soviet attack. There also are environmental concerns that add to the political obstacles. Officials point out, for example, that not one MX missile has yet been deployed, despite years of research, development and congressional battles.

'Triad' Basing Policy

The current balance of nuclear terror between the two superpowers is deceptive, the Administration believes, because it gradually will turn in the Soviets' favor. According to U.S. intelligence estimates, the Soviet Union now has about 6,000 nuclear warheads on land-based intercontinental missiles, compared to only 2,000 for the United States.

The United States compensates for this imbalance with a "triad" basing policy, with nuclear weapons positioned on land, at sea and in aircraft. All the U.S. nuclear eggs thus are not in one basket.

Overall, the United States has approximately 10,800 intercontinental warheads, compared to the Soviets' 8,700. But the missile-armed submarines, which are diffi-

cult to communicate with, and the airplanes, which are relatively slow-moving besides being vulnerable on their landing strips, are not sufficient by themselves to serve as a credible U.S. deterrent.

The anticipation within the Administration is that the Kremlin in about 10 years—while the United States is finding it increasingly difficult to deploy land-based missiles—will be developing more and more highly mobile, land-based intercontinental missiles and hiding them throughout the vast region of the Soviet Union. They are expected to be in deep forests and in buildings that will make them impossible to detect, even with sophisticated spy satellites.

Administration officials believe that the most effective countermeasure available to the United States is a non-nuclear, space-based defense system against nuclear missiles. And Reagan believes in the concept probably more firmly than anybody, officials say.

For Reagan, according to one Administration official, the Strategic Defense Initiative is above all else a "moral imperative." He explained: "The President feels uncomfortable with that finger-on-the-button responsibility with no alternative. And he's resolved to look for a better way for some future President. He feels very strongly about it."

Reagan feels so strongly about the need to develop "Star Wars"—at least to do the research on it—that on Monday in a newspaper interview he declared it non-negotiable at U.S.-Soviet arms talks scheduled to convene March 12 in Geneva. White House spokesman Larry Speakes re-emphasized this position Tuesday after consulting with the President.

But there is a slightly more flexible view among some Administration officials, who from the inception of "Star Wars" nearly two years ago have regarded it as a potential bargaining chip in arms talks.

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Bitter Opposition

Some Reagan advisers conceive of a scenario where negotiators for the United States and the Soviet Union, which is bitterly opposed even to U.S. research into "Star Wars," might agree to a dramatic reduction in Soviet land-based missiles in exchange for limits on verifiable defense initiative testing and/or short-term postponement in deploying the system. They consider the initiative as inevitably negotiable in some form. But they also believe that, from a bargaining standpoint, it was advantageous for Reagan to declare "Star Wars" off limits to negotiation.

The real goal in the upcoming Geneva arms talks, in the Administration's view, is to bring about a substantial reduction in nuclear weapons and to persuade the Soviets that it is in both superpowers' interests to switch their strategic emphasis from offense to defense.

Success at Geneva, in the Administration's view, hinges largely on Reagan being able to sell "Star Wars" to the American public and to Congress. They believe that Americans—as well as the Soviet leaders—should be open to the argument that it is better to rely for security on a non-nuclear defense system than to depend on nuclear missiles that ultimately could destroy civilization.

Reagan came into office in 1981 firmly subscribing to this thesis,

having read various articles about the concept of a futuristic, space-based defense system. But it was not until a January, 1983, meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—which the President chaired—that what was later dubbed "Star Wars" was ever seriously considered.

The idea was broached by Adm. James Watkins, chief of naval operations, who—in almost a throwaway comment—advised the U.S. government to think about

beginning to research a space-based defensive system. Robert C. McFarlane, then the President's deputy national security adviser, interrupted the meeting on his own—to Reagan's surprise—and asked each armed services chief whether he believed such a system was possible to develop. They all agreed that it was.

McFarlane, who later was appointed by Reagan to the top job of national security adviser, spent a

long session with the President the next day in the Oval Office and enthusiastically told him that such a system could be revolutionary. Reagan was quickly sold on the idea and ordered the immediate start of planning for a research program.

Some advisers, it is known, later came to believe that the President was "oversold" to the point where he now refuses to use the initiative as a bargaining chip.